

Emma B. Hodge

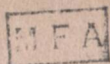
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Samplers

A Brief Historical Treatise on
Needlework Samplers



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A Brief Historical Treatise on
Needlework Samplers
by
Mrs. Emma B. Hodge



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Needlework Samplers



THE word sampler is a shortened form of "exampler," which means a pattern. Various other earlier forms of the word appear as "exampler," "saumplaire," "sawmplar," "sampleth," and "sam-cloth." The earliest samplers were those made by adults for use as records of patterns and stitches of needle work. Each was merely a collection of embroidery, lace, cut and drawn-work. Later, when samplers became educational tasks for children, the stitches and designs became simpler, and a more conscious attempt at composition was made. The alphabet and numerals usually were incorporated, and often a highly moral verse and a statement giving the worker's name and age added. Thus samplers, beginning with a very utilitarian purpose, assumed, especially in America and England, the more quaint and playful form with which we are more familiar.

Samplers were made numerously in Great Britain, Belgium, France, Germany, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Italy, Spain and America. They are to be found even as far east as Calcutta where they were probably made at the Mission Schools.

Usually samplers were made upon coarse

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bleached and unbleached linen canvas, and to the sturdiness of this material we owe the preservation of many; yet those which were made upon frailer backing have in many cases outlasted the century.

The earliest examples, such as the Stuart samplers, were choice works of art. They were composed of numerous strips of lace, cut-work and drawn-work, and had much of the precious feeling of an illuminated page or miniature. Being long and narrow, they were rolled on an ivory stick in the same manner as Japanese kakimonos.

References to samplers are found in English literature from the XVI century onward. One of the first to speak of them was John Skelton, who was Poet Laureate of England (about 1460-1529). Later Sir Philip Sidney, Shakespeare, Herrick and Thomas Milles refer to them. Mention of them also appears in public documents and historical manuscripts of the XVI century. For instance, the household accounts of Queen Elizabeth of York, who was the mother of Henry the VIII (1465-1503), preserved in the Public Record Office, contain the entry: "To Thomas Fissch, for an elne (or ell—about forty-five inches) of Lynlyn cloth for a sampler for the Queen, viij d." In looking further, we find in an inventory of King Edward VI's property, made in 1552 the following: "Item, one sampler of Normandie canvas, wrought with green and black silk."

More recent references are to be found in the writings of Pope, Keats, Burns, Thackeray, Dickens and Miss Mitford.

Genuine samplers in fine condition and earlier than the XVII century are extremely rare. The first dated sampler known, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, bears the date 1643.

The various patterns or designs were traditional ones copied from pattern-books, of which the best known were published in England in 1632. The Venetian pattern-books of the latter part of the XVI century and the early years of the XVII furnished the geometrical designs of the drawn and cut-work bands. Owing to the high cost of these pattern-books, the designs were copied upon sam-cloth by those who were not able to purchase the pattern-books. Thus was accomplished the combined purpose of obtaining the design and exhibiting the proficiency of the worker.

The designs on the XVII century English samplers were largely floral and geometric. The flowers used were the well known varieties, such as red and white roses, carnations, tulips, pansies and the honeysuckle; and it is interesting to note that, in samplers from Italy and France, the same flowers appear, all quite similar in style and arrangement to those found in the illuminated breviaries and books of hours of the XV century, indicating, seemingly, that these were the common sources of inspiration

of the workers of the early samplers. Occasionally we meet with small, quaint, human figures bearing flowers, vases with lids, or branches with leaves on either side. To these figures the name "boxers" has been given. That they are called "boxers" is probably due to the fact that their closely fitting costumes and their extended arms brought that popular sport to mind, although these figures with their offerings or trophies, as they may be termed, are clearly not of a combative character. One may, in truth, almost with certainty, place them in the category of the Greek Erotes, the Roman Amores, or the cupids of the Renaissance.

Upon some of the Stuart samplers are found the Emblems of the Passion, such as the cock, the ladder, the pincers, the smiting-hand, the cross, the napkin and other emblems. Occasionally we see these emblems also upon XVIII and XIX century Italian samplers.

In the XVIII and XIX centuries more pictorial patterns occur; Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, landscapes, and small formal houses within fenced enclosures. The numerals and alphabets were supplemented by religious verses and texts from the Scriptures. This change was probably due to the rise and prevalence of Methodism during the XVIII century. About 1778 map-samplers became popular.

No young lady's education during the XVII and XVIII centuries was considered complete until she had embroidered her sampler in silk

or woolen threads. These were worked in various and difficult stitches, in colored silks and wool, on a strong and rather loose hand-woven canvas, bleached or unbleached.

The embroidery sampler was generally done in colored silks with an occasional metal thread. Linen thread was, however, used for "white work" on the XVII century cut and drawn work samplers. Later, both cotton and woolen threads were employed.

In the XVII century, besides the lace work, many varieties of stitches were used. A flat satin stitch, when worked in white thread, was known as the damask stitch. Short and back stitches, French knots, petit-point, tent-stitch, couching-stitch, outline-stitch, cross-stitch, hollie-point, and others were all employed. The XVIII and XIX centuries showed much less variety.

The lettering in both the XVII and XVIII centuries was embroidered in cross-, satin-, and bird's-eye or eyelet-stitches. Darning stitches were popular on various diaper patterns at the close of the XVIII century, and they were either worked over the fabric, as in the English darned sampler, or else cross-squares were cut out of the ground and filled in, as in the Dutch darned sampler.

In England and America the pleasant custom of sampler making lasted well into the XIX century. Yet with the passing of a more leisurely age it gradually died out. For us of

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this hurried century this quaint, charming and domestic branch of needlework, with its honorable history of three centuries, in so many different countries, has an imaginative as well as aesthetic interest.

These notes are gathered from various authorities among which the following are gratefully recommended to other students:

"Needlework as Art," Lady Marian M. Alford.

"Practical Book of Early American Arts and Crafts," Harold Donaldson Eberlein and Abbot McClure.

"Embroidery and Tapestry Weaving," Mrs. A. H. Christie.

"Quest of the Quaint," Virginia Robie.

"Samplers and Tapestry Embroideries," Marcus B. Huish.

"A. B. C. About Collecting," Sir James H. Yoxall.

"More About Collecting," Sir James H. Yoxall.

"Chats on Old Lace and Needlework," Mrs. Emily L. Lowes.

"The Dictionary of Needlework," S. F. A. Caulfield and Blanche C. Saward.

"Samplers of Other Days," Elizabeth L. Gebhard.

"Victoria and Albert Museum, Department of Textiles, Catalogue of Samplers for 1915."

"Home Life in Colonial Days," Alice Morse Earle.

"History of Lace," Mrs. Bury Palliser.

"History of Hand-Made Lace," Mrs. F. Nevill Jackson.

"Decorative Textiles," George Leland Hunter.

"Map Samplers," Robert H. Van Court, American Homes and Gardens, May, 1913.

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